OBSERVATIONAL NOTES ON PUBLIC RECORD · FOIA 26-00745-F · COLUMBUS ZOO & AQUARIUM

The Izzy Incident.

A line-by-line comparison of the USDA APHIS critical citation against every named, verifiable statement made by Columbus Zoo staff in the press, March 11–12, 2021.

INCIDENT DATE	INSPECTION DATE	USDA CUSTOMER ID	CITATION
11 March 2021, ≈09:55 ET	29 March 2021	2204 · Cert 31-C-0042	9 CFR § 2.131(b)(1) — Critical

The Columbus Zoo issued a single press statement and made its Vice President of Animal Programs available for interviews on March 11–12, 2021. Eighteen days later, USDA inspector Shannon Sebera filed a critical citation describing two distinct facility-protocol breaches by the handlers. The two records are reproduced below alongside the zoo's own 2017 crisis-communications playbook. Any departure between them is what the public record contains; nothing here is a conclusion about intent.

§ 1 The USDA finding, verbatim

From the inspection report dated 29 March 2021, prepared by Animal Care Inspector Shannon Sebera, USDA APHIS. Cited as a **Critical** non-compliance under 9 CFR § 2.131(b)(1) — Handling of Animals. Reproduced from the FOIA release (FOIA file 26-00745-F, pp. 5–6) without alteration.

USDA APHIS · INSPECTION REPORT · 29 MAR 2021 CRITICAL

2.131(b)(1) — Handling of animals

On March 11, 2021 the improper handling of an approximately 5 year old female Cheetah "Izzy", caused behavioral stress to the animal that resulted in the injury of another facility keeper/employee. Izzy was being transferred from her enclosure to an exercise yard across an employee access road that is not open to the public when the incident occurred.

The facility's internal cheetah handling protocol requires two handlers to use a *primary harness with leash, as well as a secondary prong collar and leash to be used at all times*. The secondary collar allows the handlers to have a secondary emergency control point to de-escalate any behavioral issues or stress indicated by the animal and ensure the animal is transporting the animal as expeditiously and carefully as possible.

According to the report provided by the facility, *the two handlers broke facility protocols by having Izzy solely on a harness for the transfer without the required back-up prong collar.* During this transfer, another facility employee was also using the access road to perform normal duties at the facility. *Izzy lowered her body and exhibited stalking behaviors as soon as she noticed the other employee approaching.*

After the lead handler thought the cheetah was under control, *the handler again broke the facility's protocol by inviting the other employee to approach the cheetah*, the cat then lunged and bit the approaching employee, causing injury. Both handlers were reprimanded and will be retrained prior to reassuming normal duties as a Cheetah handler.

Prepared by: SHANNON SEBERA, Animal Care Inspector · USDA, APHIS, Animal Care · Date: 30-MAR-2021 · Correction Date: 3/30/2021

§ 2 Who actually spoke for the zoo

Of the 18 Columbus Zoo executive and staff names that appear in coverage between 2020 and 2026, only one is named in any contemporaneous report of this incident: **Suzi Rapp**, Vice President of Animal Programs. Every other on-the-record sentence attributed to "the Columbus Zoo" originates in a single written press statement distributed to outlets between approximately 11:30 a.m. and 7:30 p.m. on March 11, 2021. That statement was not signed.

THE SPEAKER — CONTEXT THE PUBLIC DID NOT HAVE ON MARCH 11, 2021

Rapp had been at the Columbus Zoo for more than 40 years and had built and run the Animal Programs department — the unit that produced cheetah-walking, ambassador-cat television appearances, and Jack Hanna's traveling-animal segments. **Twenty-six days after** she gave the Izzy interviews, the documentary *The Conservation Game* premiered (April 6, 2021) and named Rapp specifically — alongside Hanna — as a central figure in alleged misrepresentation of where ambassador big cats came from and where they went after on-air appearances. Reviewers report the film captures Hanna and Rapp on camera saying of the federal Big Cat Public Safety Act, *"We can no longer do our business if the bill is passed."* The Columbus Dispatch reported on August 17, 2021 that Rapp had also written a letter in support of Grant Kemmerer's Pennsylvania facility after Kemmerer was cited in New York for wildlife-law violations.

Rapp retired in July 2021. The Columbus Zoo lost its AZA accreditation on October 1, 2021. None of this was public on March 11–12. Reporters that day took her at face value as the zoo's senior animal-care voice. Read in 2026, the framing she chose for the Izzy incident sits inside a longer pattern visible in § 5 below.

ATTRIBUTION CAVEATS — WHAT COULD NOT BE VERIFIED

Nicolle Gómez Racey (also rendered "Nicole Racey-Gomez") had been Vice President of Communications and Marketing since July 31, 2020 — she was in role at the time of the incident and would conventionally have approved the press statement. Her career background, per public LinkedIn-adjacent records, is heavily PR/communications: producer at *WBNS-10TV Columbus* (the same station that ran the on-camera Rapp interview about Izzy), Irvin Public Relations, Director of Communications at Susan G. Komen Columbus, Director of Marketing & Communications at Volunteers of America Ohio and Indiana — i.e., a decade-plus in crisis-sensitive nonprofit communications before joining the zoo. I cannot find a single direct quotation from her on this specific incident in any 2021 publication. Her named quotations on Columbus Zoo matters begin appearing in the public record in August 2021 (*Conservation Game*), 2024 (Tom Stalf sentencing), and 2026 (bomb-threat evacuations).

Jennifer Fields is named as *Director of Communications* in February 2020 (cub-birth coverage) and in September 2025 (Paula the zebra death). Her professional background is unusually relevant: per ZoomInfo/RocketReach reproductions of her LinkedIn, she previously served as *Communications Coordinator at the Association of Zoos and Aquariums itself*, before moving to The Buffalo Zoo and then Columbus Zoo. She holds an Ohio State BA and a Miami University master's in biology. Her listed skills include *Strategic Communications* and *Crisis Communications*. She currently serves on the AZA Public Relations Committee. She is not named in any Izzy-incident article I have located.

The point is not that either should have been named — the 2017 playbook itself recommends a subject-matter-expert spokesperson, and Rapp was that for the Animal Programs subject. The point is that at the time of the incident, Columbus Zoo had on staff: (a) a VP of Communications with PR/crisis-comms tenure across multiple nonprofits, and (b) a Director of Communications whose immediately prior employer was AZA national HQ and whose own skills list includes "Crisis Communications." If a press release was issued and an on-camera spokesperson coordinated, these are reasonably the two people who would have shaped that work. Per your instruction, no quotes from them about Izzy have been included — because none have been located.

Named, on-the-record quotations

Suzi Rapp — *VP, Animal Programs (retired July 2021 after Conservation Game)*

12 Mar 2021 · to *The Columbus Dispatch* (Eric Lagatta)

> *"Right now we're just trying to iron out exactly what happened."*

Rapp added that the injured person "is OK." She declined to identify the keeper or describe their injuries, citing privacy laws. This is the only named statement that acknowledges anything was unclear about what happened.

▸ SOURCE — DISPATCH VIA AOL

Suzi Rapp — *VP, Animal Programs* 12 Mar 2021 · to WBNS-10TV (Columbus)

> *"You can train a wild animal, but it is impossible to tame them ... instinct is so powerful."*

Continuing: "They are a wild animal and we treat them as that." This framing locates the cause of the incident in the animal's wild nature, not in handler behavior. The USDA citation locates the cause in handler protocol violations. The same rhetorical move — externalizing causation — recurs in Rapp's later statements about the Big Cat Public Safety Act and AZA accreditation; see § 5.

▸ SOURCE — WBNS-10TV

Suzi Rapp — *VP, Animal Programs* 12 Mar 2021 · to *The Columbus Dispatch*

> *"Izzy, through leaps and bounds through the cheetah world, is a very famous cheetah."*

Rapp described Izzy as "an incredibly well-trained animal" — a characterization that, when read alongside the USDA narrative, places the burden of the lunge on instinct rather than on the missing prong-collar back-up that facility protocol required.

▸ SOURCE — NEWSER CITING DISPATCH

Unsigned press-release language (no named speaker)

All of the following appears in articles between March 11–12, 2021, attributed only to "the Columbus Zoo," "zoo officials," or "the zoo said in a statement." The same wording appears across multiple outlets because the same written statement was distributed; the verbatim language can be located in the most complete reproduction at NBC4 below.

Columbus Zoo press statement — *written, unsigned* 11 Mar 2021 · most complete copy at NBC4 WCMH-TV

> *"Isabelle's care team had her sit and she was calm and purring. The team invited the keeper to approach closer."*

The press statement describes Izzy as calm at the moment the second keeper was invited closer. The USDA report places the invitation *after* Izzy had already "lowered her body and exhibited stalking behaviors."

▸ SOURCE — NBC4 WCMH (FULL TEXT)

Columbus Zoo press statement — *written, unsigned* 11 Mar 2021 · via ABC News / Good Morning America

> *"... the scent of these other animals on the keeper triggered a natural instinct in Isabelle, who reacted."*

The "scent triggered instinct" framing became the headline of the wire story and was repeated by GMA, Fox News, the AP/CBS Pittsburgh, the Washington Times, iHeartRadio, KIRO 7, WHIO, WDBO, WFTV, Fox23, and others. The USDA report makes no mention of scent.

▸ SOURCE — GMA / ABC NEWS

Columbus Zoo press statement — *written, unsigned* 11 Mar 2021 · via AP / CBS Pittsburgh

> *"... two animal program staff members were walking the harnessed 4-year-old cheetah, Isabelle ..."*

The statement specifies the cheetah was "harnessed" per "standard procedure." It does not mention the secondary prong-collar/leash that facility protocol required and that USDA found was missing.

▸ SOURCE — AP VIA CBS PITTSBURGH

Columbus Zoo press statement — *written, unsigned* 11 Mar 2021 · via Washington Times

> *"The incident will be fully evaluated."*

The statement called the attack the cheetah's "first incident" and committed to a full evaluation. No public follow-up communications from the zoo elaborating on the evaluation have surfaced in coverage between March 2021 and the date of this document.

▸ SOURCE — WASHINGTON TIMES

§ 3 Side-by-side: each factual claim

Each row pairs a factual element in the USDA inspection record with the corresponding element in the zoo's public communications. Yellow highlight marks the specific words being compared.

FACT	WHAT THE USDA INSPECTOR FOUND	WHAT THE ZOO SAID PUBLICLY
RESTRAINT USED ON IZZY	Protocol requires *primary harness + secondary prong collar & leash at all times*. The handlers "broke facility protocols by having Izzy solely on a harness for the transfer without the required back-up prong collar."	Izzy "was *harnessed*" "per normal protocol" / "standard procedure." No mention of the missing prong-collar back-up.
IZZY'S BEHAVIORAL STATE WHEN THE SECOND KEEPER WAS INVITED CLOSER	Izzy had already *"lowered her body and exhibited stalking behaviors as soon as she noticed the other employee approaching."* The lead handler then "thought the cheetah was under control" — and invited the keeper closer anyway.	"Isabelle's care team had her sit and she was *calm and purring*. The team invited the keeper to approach closer."
WHY THE CHEETAH LUNGED	"Improper handling ... caused behavioral stress to the animal that resulted in the injury." Cause assigned to handler protocol breach.	*"The scent of these other animals on the keeper triggered a natural instinct in Isabelle."* Cause assigned to animal instinct.
SECOND HANDLER INVITATION	"The handler *again broke the facility's protocol* by inviting the other employee to approach the cheetah" after stalking behaviour had already been observed.	"The team invited the keeper to approach closer" — described as a routine step taken while Izzy was calm.
CONSEQUENCES FOR HANDLERS	*"Both handlers were reprimanded and will be retrained prior to reassuming normal duties as a Cheetah handler."*	No public mention of any handler discipline, retraining, or protocol breach in any contemporaneous report I can locate.
SEVERITY CLASSIFICATION	Cited as *Critical* non-compliance under 9 CFR § 2.131(b)(1) — the most serious USDA-APHIS designation, reserved for situations that have caused or are likely to cause serious harm.	No characterization of severity. Rapp said the team was "trying to iron out exactly what happened"; the zoo said the incident "will be fully evaluated."
PRESS COVERAGE OF USDA FINDINGS	Inspection report dated 30 March 2021. Becomes part of the public record via USDA APHIS upon issuance.	No follow-up coverage located. The USDA's contradictory account of the same incident does not appear to have been reported by any outlet that covered the original story.

§ 4 The single material contradiction

The most consequential discrepancy is the sequence of events. Read carefully, the two accounts describe different moments of decision:

SEQUENCE — ZOO STATEMENT

1. Care team has Izzy sit. → **2.** Izzy is calm and purring. → **3.** Team invites keeper closer. → **4.** Izzy crouches and lunges, apparently triggered by giraffe scent.

SEQUENCE — USDA INSPECTOR

1. Izzy is on harness only — protocol violation, no back-up prong collar. → **2.** Izzy *lowers body and exhibits stalking behaviour* when she sees the keeper approaching. → **3.** Lead handler "thought the cheetah was under control" and invited the keeper anyway — second protocol violation. → **4.** Cheetah lunges and bites.

If the USDA account is accurate, the cheetah was not "calm and purring" at the moment of the invitation; she was already stalking. The zoo's public characterisation of Izzy's state immediately before the invitation does not survive the inspector's account of the handler's own report to USDA — which is the inspector's documented source for the chronology.

§ 5 The framing pattern, March → October 2021

The Izzy interviews do not exist in isolation. They sit at the front edge of a seven-month crisis arc in which the same spokesperson, using the same rhetorical move — *locate causation in animal nature and external pressure, not in zoo decisions* — became the public face of two unrelated controversies that ultimately ended both her career at the zoo and the zoo's AZA accreditation.

TIMELINE MARKER KEY

🔵 Zoo communications / PR doctrine event 🔴 USDA APHIS / federal regulatory action 🟡 Institutional crisis / accreditation / scandal

May 2017	🔵	**Columbus Zoo publishes its own Crisis Communications playbook** Patty Peters, VP Community Relations, presents the deck at the ZAHP Safety Summit. Sets out the rules covered in § 6 below. *Predates the Izzy incident by nearly 4 years.*
2020	🔵	**Peters retires · Gómez Racey begins as VP Comms** Per LinkedIn, Peters retired in 2020. Nicolle Gómez Racey began as VP Communications & Marketing on July 31, 2020. The playbook's author was no longer at the zoo when Izzy was bitten 7 months later.
Mar 11, 2021	🔴	**Izzy bites keeper · cheetah handling protocol violated** Rapp on the record: "instinct is so powerful" / animal "wild" / "we treat them as that." Zoo press release: scent of giraffes triggered "natural instinct." USDA later: two protocol breaches by handlers.
Mar 12, 2021	🔵	**Press cycle peaks** Cox/AP wire syndication carries zoo statement nationally. No mention of handler decisions or required prong-collar back-up.
late Mar 2021	🔵	**Columbus Dispatch financial investigation begins** First reporting on personal use of zoo assets by former executives — eventually $2.29 million in alleged theft. Separate from Rapp.
Mar 29, 2021	🔴	**USDA inspection — critical citation issued** 9 CFR § 2.131(b)(1). Inspector Sebera files protocol-breach narrative. Correction date 30 March 2021.
Apr 6, 2021	🟡	**"The Conservation Game" premieres · Santa Barbara IFF** Documentary names Rapp and Hanna as central figures in alleged ambassador-animal misrepresentation. Captures them on camera opposing the Big Cat Public Safety Act.
Apr 7, 2021	🟡	**Jack Hanna retires from public life** Family announces dementia diagnosis the day after the film's premiere.
Jul 2021	🟡	**Suzi Rapp retires from Columbus Zoo** After 40+ years. Coverage repeatedly notes the timing relative to the documentary.
Aug 17, 2021	🔵	**Columbus Dispatch: first detailed Conservation Game coverage** VP Comms Nicolle Gómez Racey confirms the zoo cut ties with the named facilities except Tanganyika (two older Columbus cheetahs housed there). Rapp's defense of unaccredited facilities is reproduced in the article.
Oct 1, 2021	🟡	**AZA Accreditation Commission denies accreditation** Columbus Zoo loses AZA accreditation. The zoo would not regain it until March 2023.

The recurring rhetorical move

Three Rapp statements, three controversies, one structure. Each locates the source of the problem somewhere other than zoo decision-making — in the animal's nature, in legislators' overreach, or in accreditation snobbery. Read in sequence, the language is unusually consistent for a forty-year veteran of a senior animal-welfare role.

IZZY INCIDENT · MAR 12, 2021 · TO WBNS-10TV

> *"You can train a wild animal, but it is impossible to tame them ... instinct is so powerful."*

Pivot: Cause located in the cheetah's wild nature. **USDA's actual cause:** two facility-protocol breaches by handlers (no back-up prong collar; invitation to approach after stalking behavior).

THE CONSERVATION GAME (FILMED PRE-APR 2021)

> *"We can no longer do our business if the bill is passed."*

Pivot: Joint on-camera statement (Hanna and Rapp) about the federal Big Cat Public Safety Act. Frames a public-safety law as a threat to the zoo's "business." **What the bill actually restricts:** private ownership and public cub-petting interactions with exotic cats.

COLUMBUS DISPATCH · AUG 17, 2021

> *"It would be very critical to say if you're not an AZA zoo you're not a good zoo."*

Pivot: Defense of unaccredited facilities, including Grant Kemmerer's, which she had written in support of after Kemmerer was cited in New York for wildlife violations. **Six weeks later:** the AZA itself voted to deny Columbus's accreditation, partly over the practices the documentary exposed.

IZZY PRESS RELEASE · MAR 11, 2021

> *"... the scent of these other animals on the keeper triggered a natural instinct in Isabelle, who reacted."*

Pivot: Even in the unsigned written release, the chosen explanation is olfactory / instinctual. The required secondary prong collar — the missing piece USDA cited — is never mentioned. **Effect:** the keeper's giraffe-handler identity becomes the news hook; the protocol breach disappears.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR READING THE PUBLIC RECORD

The Izzy quotes were not obviously inadequate on March 11, 2021. They became inadequate retroactively as two later disclosures landed: the USDA's protocol-breach citation (formally dated March 30, 2021, but only surfaced via FOIA) and *The Conservation Game* (April 6, 2021). The pattern visible across all three episodes is the same: when an animal-welfare or accreditation problem requires a zoo response, the chosen frame externalizes causation — to animal instinct, to legislator overreach, to AZA gatekeeping — while internal decisions (handler protocol, ambassador-animal sourcing, choice of partner facilities) are not addressed.

None of this proves the Izzy framing was strategic deflection rather than a sincere first-day characterization made before all facts were known. It does establish that the same spokesperson, in the same calendar year, used the same structure of argument in three documented controversies — and that the structure consistently obscured the zoo's own decisions.

§ 6 Against the zoo's own 2017 playbook

In May 2017, the Columbus Zoo's then–Vice President of Community Relations, **Patty Peters**, delivered a presentation called *Crisis Communications* at the Zoo Animal Health Protection (ZAHP) Safety Summit. The slide deck — reachable below at [E1] — sets out Columbus Zoo's own crisis-communications framework, written by senior staff and addressed to peer institutions in the AZA professional community. Peters's LinkedIn lists her specialties as public relations, crisis communications, membership, marketing, and zoos, with AZA affiliation reflecting decades of work within the accredited-zoo community.

Important context: Peters retired in 2020 — roughly seven months before the Izzy incident. Her effective successor, Nicolle Gómez Racey, started as VP Communications & Marketing on July 31, 2020. So the deck was not the voice of the person responsible for the March 11, 2021 response. It was, however, the most recent articulation of Columbus Zoo's *institutional* approach to crisis communications, written by the predecessor of the person in role on the day of the incident and addressed to the wider AZA community as standard practice. The AZA itself has a Public Relations Committee that *"provides public relations and crisis communications counsel to AZA and member institutions"*; Columbus Zoo's current Director of Communications, Jen Fields, sits on it today.

Two other facts are worth holding alongside the "Peters had retired" point. First, Gómez Racey's background before joining the zoo was a decade-plus in nonprofit communications including Susan G. Komen Columbus and Volunteers of America — i.e., she had not arrived without crisis-comms experience. Second, Jen Fields, who was Director of Communications at the zoo at the time and remains so today, came to Columbus directly from a Communications Coordinator role at *AZA national headquarters*, and lists *Crisis Communications* as one of her own LinkedIn skills. The 2017 playbook author had retired, but the framework she wrote was not orphaned doctrine — it was the field the next two people in the role had spent their careers in. Whatever explains the gap between the deck and the response, lack of trained crisis-communications staff on the day is not the explanation.

The deck explicitly lists *"Keeper or visitor death or injury"* and *"Animal mistreatment (or perceived mistreatment)"* among the crisis categories it covers. The Izzy incident fell squarely within both. The rules the deck sets out are the rules the zoo had publicly committed itself to four years earlier — and the rules a comms successor inheriting the role would reasonably have been expected to know. Read against the March 11–12 statements, the deck's own language is the most useful yardstick — better than anything an outside observer could impose.

SOURCE: PATTY PETERS, "CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS," ZAHP SAFETY SUMMIT · MAY 2017 · SLIDES 6, 12, 13, 14

Rule-by-rule comparison

Each row pairs a rule the Columbus Zoo's own VP of Community Relations published in 2017 with the response observed on March 11–12, 2021. Verdicts ("followed," "partial," "missed") are descriptive, based on what the slide says vs. what the zoo did.

2017 COLUMBUS ZOO RULE	WHAT HAPPENED ON MARCH 11-12, 2021
"Tell your side of the story ... Avoid speculation and false assumptions." slide titled "Plan, prepare, rehearse and periodically review"	MISSED The press statement attributed the lunge to a speculative cause — that the giraffe-keeper's scent triggered Izzy's instinct. Eighteen days later, USDA documented the actual cause as a handler protocol breach. The rule the zoo wrote for itself in 2017 explicitly cautioned against this.
"Stick to the facts and don't speculate. If asked to speculate – tell them this is not useful." slide "Working with the Media"	MISSED Rapp's WBNS quote — "instinct is so powerful" — is speculation about the cheetah's internal state. The unsigned press release's "scent triggered a natural instinct" is similarly inferential. No facts that USDA later cited (missing back-up prong collar; lead handler invitation after stalking behavior) appear in the zoo's day-one account.
"Be careful with 'Why did it happen?'" slide "Questions to Answer During a Crisis"	MISSED The day-one statements answered "Why did it happen?" with confidence — "scent of these other animals ... triggered a natural instinct." The deck specifically advises caution on this exact question.
"'If it's going to come out eventually, better have it come out immediately.' – Kissinger" slide "Working with the Media" — the Kissinger quote is in the deck	MISSED The handler protocol breach did come out — via the USDA's correction-date-March-30 citation, surfacing via FOIA. The zoo's own deck quotes Henry Kissinger to argue facts should be released by the institution, not by outside agencies. They were not.
"Maintain control of the situation so the media doesn't seek information from other sources." slide "Plan, prepare, rehearse"	PARTIAL The zoo controlled day-one media access (single spokesperson, single press release, Cox/AP wire pickup). It did not control day-eighteen, when the USDA inspection became the alternative — and more authoritative — source on the same event.
"Avoid statements of liability – don't try to lay blame." slide "Working with the Media"	PARTIAL The zoo did not lay blame on staff. It did, however, locate causation outside the zoo (animal instinct, the keeper's scent) — which is the inverse rhetorical move. The rule says "don't lay blame"; the deck does not endorse externalizing it either.
"Designate a Media Spokesperson ... Needs to be completely informed." slide "Media Spokesperson(s)"	FOLLOWED Suzi Rapp, VP Animal Programs, was the designated on-record spokesperson for animal-handling subject matter. She fit the deck's requirement of subject-matter knowledge. She was also, separately, an interested party — a fact only visible 26 days later when *The Conservation Game* premiered. The deck does not address spokesperson conflicts of interest, and the deck's author (Peters) had retired by this point; her successor Gómez Racey, in role for ~7 months, would have made the day-of staffing call.
"Show empathy. Express genuine concern for the victim." slide "Working with the Media" — Theodore Roosevelt quote: "Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care"	PARTIAL Rapp said the injured keeper "is OK." The zoo cited privacy laws to decline further detail. There was no public statement expressing concern for the keeper as a named or unnamed individual; the keeper's giraffe-handling identity functioned in the narrative primarily as the explanatory hook for Izzy's reaction, not as the subject of empathy.
"Make sure internal audiences hear it from you first." slide "What To Do When A Crisis Occurs"	UNKNOWN / NOT OBSERVABLE IN PUBLIC RECORD Whether the zoo's own staff were briefed before the press release is not visible from outside. The USDA report notes the citation arose "according to the report provided by the facility" — meaning internal reporting did happen — but the deck's specific rule about internal-first is a process question public sources cannot answer.

OBSERVATION, NOT CONCLUSION

The 2017 Crisis Communications playbook was Columbus Zoo's own articulation of how an incident like Izzy's should be handled. On at least four specific rules the deck sets out — avoid speculation, stick to the facts, be careful with "why did it happen," and let inconvenient facts come from you rather than from another source — the March 11–12 response did not match what the zoo's own VP of Community Relations had told peer institutions to do four years earlier.

The author of the deck, Patty Peters, had retired in 2020. But the comms function she had built was not staff-thin in March 2021: Nicolle Gómez Racey (VP Communications, ~7 months in role, decade-plus prior nonprofit crisis-comms tenure) and Jennifer Fields (Director of Communications, immediately prior role at AZA national HQ, "Crisis Communications" listed among her own skills) were both in role. The institutional framework had not been lost. The observation is the gap between Columbus Zoo's own articulated framework — written by one comms VP and inherited by a successor whose director-level deputy came directly from AZA's own communications office — and the response the public received on day one. It is the kind of gap any institution's communications team is positioned to notice and close after the fact; it is also the kind of gap that, when it persists, prompts investigative requests like the one that surfaced these records.

§ 7 Sources cited, in full

Every link below was open and accessible at the time of writing. Items marked † are reproductions of the same Associated Press / Cox Media Group syndicated story; the underlying zoo press statement is the same, only the host outlet differs.

[A1]	NBC4 WCMH-TV — "Columbus Zoo cheetah lunges at keeper who works with giraffes" (most complete reproduction of zoo press release)	MAR 11, 2021
[A2]	WBNS-10TV — "Animal keeper at Columbus Zoo injured after being attacked by cheetah" (Suzi Rapp on-camera interview)	MAR 11, 2021
[A3]	ABC News / Good Morning America — "Cheetah attacks Columbus Zoo employee; staffer hospitalized and released"	MAR 11, 2021
[A4]	Columbus Dispatch via AOL/Yahoo (Eric Lagatta) — "Zookeeper injured after being attacked by a cheetah at the Columbus Zoo" (Rapp interview, mention of sister Ophelia euthanasia)	MAR 12, 2021
[A5]	AP via CBS News Pittsburgh — "Cheetah Attacks Worker At Columbus Zoo, Authorities Begin Probe"	MAR 12, 2021
[A6]	The Washington Times — "Zoo investigating after cheetah attack on Columbus zookeeper"	MAR 12, 2021
[A7]	Newser — "'Very Famous Cheetah' Attacks Zookeeper" (Rapp Dispatch interview re-quoted)	MAR 12, 2021
[A8]	Fox News — "Cheetah attacks Ohio zookeeper, scent of other animals likely triggered the cat" (Paul Best, print)	MAR 12, 2021
[A9]	iHeartRadio — "Ohio Zookeeper Hospitalized Following Cheetah Attack"	MAR 11, 2021
[A10]†	KIRO 7 News Seattle — Cox syndication	MAR 12, 2021
[A11]†	WHIO TV 7 (Dayton) — Cox syndication	MAR 12, 2021
[A12]†	WFTV (Orlando) — Cox syndication	MAR 12, 2021
[A13]†	WDBO (Orlando) — Cox syndication	MAR 12, 2021
[A14]†	Fox 23 (Tulsa) — Cox syndication	MAR 12, 2021
[B1]	USDA APHIS Inspection Report, Customer ID 2204 / Certificate 31-C-0042, Site 001 (Columbus Zoo), 29 March 2021. Prepared by Inspector Shannon Sebera. FOIA file 26-00745-F, pp. 5–6. Citation: 9 CFR § 2.131(b)(1), Critical. Correction date: 30 March 2021.	SOURCE PDF
[D1]	The Columbus Dispatch — "First look: 'Conservation Game' documentary ties Columbus Zoo, Jack Hanna to unchecked big cat trade" (Aug 17, 2021 — primary source for Rapp's AZA-accreditation defense and Gómez Racey's "cut ties" statement)	AUG 17, 2021
[D2]	Sun Newspapers (Charlotte, FL) — syndicated reproduction of the Aug 17 Dispatch story, with full Rapp and Gómez Racey quotations	AUG 21, 2021
[D3]	Wikipedia — Jack Hanna, "Conservation Game" section (collated public-record summary of allegations against Hanna and Rapp, Big Cat Safety Act position, and post-film vendor cut-offs)	CURRENT
[D4]	Axios Columbus — "Columbus Zoo and Aquarium loses accreditation" (links the documentary, Rapp's retirement, and the AZA denial in a single narrative)	OCT 7, 2021
[D5]	AZA — Statement on Accreditation Commission's Denial of Accreditation to Columbus Zoo (President & CEO Dan Ashe, Oct 6, 2021)	OCT 6, 2021
[D6]	Alliance of Women Film Journalists — review of "The Conservation Game" containing the Hanna/Rapp joint quote about the Big Cat Public Safety Act	AUG 24, 2021
[D7]	Cargo Film & Releasing — official distributor page for "The Conservation Game" (synopsis, press round-up linking back to original outlets)	2021
[D8]	Axios Columbus — "Two years after scandal, the Columbus Zoo is accredited again" (timeline confirmation: lost Oct 2021, regained Mar 2023)	MAR 28, 2023
[C1]	Columbus Zoo press release — appointment of Nicolle Gómez Racey as VP Communications & Marketing, effective July 31, 2020 (confirms she was in role at time of incident)	JUL 16, 2020
[C2]	WPTV — Jen Fields named as Director of Communications, Feb 2020 cub birth (no Izzy-incident quote located)	FEB 25, 2020
[C3]	CityScene Magazine — profile establishing Suzi Rapp as VP Animal Programs, prior cheetah-handling background	2016
[C4]	NBC4 — Izzy died of liver disease (September 2024) — context only; not part of the 2021 incident record	SEP 16, 2024
[E1]	Patty Peters, VP Community Relations, Columbus Zoo & Aquarium / The Wilds — "Crisis Communications," ZAHP Safety Summit slide deck (the zoo's own articulated crisis-communications framework, written four years before the Izzy incident)	MAY 2017 (PDF)
[E2]	Patty Peters — LinkedIn profile (specialties: public relations, crisis communications, zoos; AZA affiliation; retired from Columbus Zoo 2020)	LINKEDIN
[E3]	AZA Public Relations Committee — committee charter ("provides public relations and crisis communications counsel to AZA and member institutions"); Jennifer Fields, Columbus Zoo, currently listed as a member	CURRENT
[E4]	Jennifer Fields — LinkedIn profile (Director of Communications, Columbus Zoo; prior Communications Coordinator at AZA national HQ; prior The Buffalo Zoo; Ohio State BA, Miami University biology MA; skills include Strategic Communications and Crisis Communications)	LINKEDIN
[E5]	Nicolle Gómez Racey — LinkedIn profile (VP Communications & Marketing, Columbus Zoo since July 31, 2020; prior Volunteers of America Ohio & Indiana, Susan G. Komen Columbus, Irvin Public Relations, WBNS-10TV; Ohio University broadcast journalism)	LINKEDIN

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